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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT SAAKASHVILI'S OCTOBER 29 VISIT TO NORWAY

REF: OSLO 513

¶1. (U) Summary: Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili visited Oslo on October 29, meeting with PM Stoltenberg, and holding a public address at the Nobel Institute. Georgian FM Eka Tkeshelashvili accompanied him and met with FM Stoere. In his remarks Saakashvili firmly blamed Russia for the conflict in August and stressed his belief that Georgia would win the "competition of ideas" with Russia and continue the economic and civil society progress made since independence. Saakashvili said that Norway "didn't say no" to eventual Georgian NATO membership and that he understood that the process would be a long one. Saakashvili also faced many questions on Georgia's record on media freedom and independence of the judiciary. Norway has recently announced an assistance package for Georgia of approximately 36 million dollars (235 million NOK) which will be used for humanitarian needs, for promotion of good governance, judicial sector reform and hydropower development. End Summary.

Russia to Blame

¶2. (U) One of the main thrusts of Saakashvili's public remarks was to explain the long history of Russian actions against Georgia leading to the August conflict. Saakashvili pointed to Russia's 2006 boycott of Georgian goods and cut off of energy supplies as the first evidence of Russian aggression. Touching only briefly on the fighting in August, Saakashvili stated that it was clear that Russia intended to invade and Georgia had no choice but to respond. Saakashvili repeatedly emphasized the realities of living next to an aggressive neighbor with overwhelming military force and the will to use it. He pointed out the huge amounts Russia spends on its security sector and said that Russia's goal was to annihilate the Georgian government and seize the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Saakashvili believes this was only stopped by the clear willingness of the Georgian armed forces to resist and President Bush's statement that a Russian attack on Tbilisi would be unacceptable. In his remarks PM Stoltenberg was not willing to assess blame for the August conflict and called for an international independent investigation. Saakashvili was positive about such an investigation. Stoltenberg repeated his condemnation of the Russian use of force in August but also stressed criticism about the Georgian government's reactions and explained Norway's practical approach to Russia.

What to do now? NATO and Economic growth

¶3. (U) The second objective of Saakashvili's remarks was to paint a picture of Georgia as a reforming, European state which should be granted NATO membership. Saakashvili rattled off a long list of ways that his government had improved the economy, fought corruption and continued to reform civil

society and government. He faced many critical questions from the audience on Georgia's record on media freedom, judicial independence and other human rights issues and answered each one with specific examples of how he was addressing these concerns. On NATO, he stated that this was a moral issue for Georgia. Georgia is trying to build a stable democracy but is threatened by Russia which does not recognize national borders. Saakashvili said it was a mistake not to give Georgia MAP status at the NATO Bucharest summit and said that Russia had taken advantage of this mistake. He claimed that Norway was supportive of granting Georgia MAP status when it was ready and said that Georgians understand that the process will take time. Saakashvili said that although Georgia cannot compete with Russia militarily it would win the "competition of ideas" by continuing Georgia's economic growth and political and societal reforms.

Norway's Response to Georgia

¶4. (SBU) Norwegian response to Saakashvili's visit was restrained and somewhat skeptical. PM Stoltenberg continued the GON's policy of criticizing both Russia and Georgia for the August conflict. Most leading GON figures view Russia's actions during the conflict as unacceptable but put a large degree of blame on Saakashvili himself for provoking Russia's response. The vast majority of Norwegians see their cooperative relationship with Russia as "smart" and the model all neighbors of Russia should follow, without acknowledging that NATO plays a role in making this work. Norwegians frequently, but carefully, imply that Russia's small neighbors provoke Russia, something "wise" Norwegians wouldn't do. Media coverage of Saakashvili's visit was somewhat critical with commentators rejecting his claim that the Bucharest's summit decision on MAP status was a factor in the Russian invasion and criticizing Georgia for human rights violations.

¶5. (U) The GON recently announced a substantial assistance package for Georgia of approximately \$36 million from 2008-2010. This money will be directed at humanitarian needs, through the NGO Norwegian Refugee Council and will be primarily help to clear unexploded ordnance. In addition Norway will work on judicial sector reform and development of Georgia's hydropower resources.

WHITNEY